

REFLECTIONS

The Chaplain's Voice

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Military Chaplaincy Review (MCR) hosts the conversation on the history, theory, and practice of military chaplaincy. It is a professional forum for dialogue, debate, disagreement, and, yes, even dissent. It is a space where we hear from one another and speak back into the ongoing conversation ourselves. My aim as the Dean of the Graduate School is to equip chaplains and Religious Affairs Specialists / NCOs to find their voice. Reading and writing for *MCR* is one way we can develop that voice. I want to begin my tenure as the Chair of the Editorial Board for *MCR* by sharing what I believe about the chaplain's voice.

Chaplains stand at the crossroads of human experience and are present in moments of joy, crisis, uncertainty, and calamity. Our voices carry the weight of conscience, empathy, compassion, and wisdom, grounded in our faith traditions and anchored in socio-cultural humility. A chaplain's voice is unlike any other voice of leadership. It is a voice that begins with "do no harm" regardless of who we are speaking to. A chaplain's voice listens, discerns, comforts, and guides. It is a voice that challenges and critiques wrongs and injustices. It is a voice that speaks truth to power. It is a voice that gives hope during times of hopelessness.

A Voice of Faith

Faith forms the foundation of a chaplain's voice. While chaplains often serve people from diverse backgrounds and beliefs, their role is grounded in a deep respect for spiritual values. Faith, in this context, is more than adherence to specific doctrines. It is a trust in something greater than oneself — a belief that life holds meaning and that God's hope and love is with us even in the most difficult situations.¹

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¹ "Do not be afraid, for I will be with you, listening and watching" (Qur'an 20:26).

A chaplain's voice of faith helps people explore questions of purpose, forgiveness, gratitude, and resilience. Their voices provide space for individuals to express doubts as well as convictions. In doing so, they affirm that one's faith is often a journey rather than a fixed destination. In moments of crisis, faith can offer comfort and stability. Prayer, reflection, and spiritual conversation can help people find perspective and strength during moments of fear and anxiety.

Chaplains also recognize that faith can take many forms. Their role is not to impose beliefs but to support individuals in exploring their own spiritual resources. This respect for the faith of others allows chaplains to serve service members with compassion and openness. Ultimately, faith gives the chaplain's voice depth and authenticity. It reminds both the chaplain and those they serve that life's challenges do not exist in isolation but within a larger spiritual context.

Not a Fair-Weather Voice

In life we endure both sunshine and storms. There are moments when our world seems clear and bright, and there are seasons when uncertainty or hardship obscures our ability to visualize a way forward. The chaplain's voice anchors itself in both realities making space to be with their flock during all seasons of life.

I use sunshine as a metaphor for seasons of joy, achievement, and gratitude. When people celebrate milestones such as graduations, promotions, recovery, reconciliation, or new beginnings, we are often present to affirm the goodness of those moments. It is our voice they hear, leading the devotions and ceremonies of gratitude and praise and making space for others to reflect upon the blessings otherwise taken for granted.

However, the same voice shows up when the storms of life appear. These storms take the form of illness, grief, loss, doubt, or fear. During such times, individuals struggle to find hope or direction. The chaplain's voice doesn't shrink during these times; instead, it meets these moments with sincerity and humility.²

One thing that makes a chaplain's voice unique is their ability to hold both sunshine and storms at the same time. Rather than offering shallow optimism, chaplains speak hope that is rooted, in faith. They understand that acknowledging pain is part of life and are willing to journey with others on their path to healing.

² "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; Make straight in the desert a highway for our God'" (Isaiah 40:3, *NKJV*).

Chaplains are a calming presence in the storm. Their words remind people that storms do not erase the existence of the sun, they simply obscure it temporarily. Through encouragement, prayer, and wisdom, chaplains help others find the strength to move through difficult seasons in life. The chaplain's voice is a reminder that every life journey can deepen our faith or foster growth and resilience.

A Voice of Encouragement

Encouragement is one of the most powerful elements of a chaplain's voice. A few thoughtful words can restore hope to someone who feels discouraged or overwhelmed. Encouragement acknowledges hardships and difficulties while affirming the strength and resilience within us. Chaplains recognize that people often underestimate their own capacity to endure hardship and grow from these experiences.

The chaplain's voice reminds individuals of their value and potential. Sometimes encouragement takes the form of reassurance, reminding someone that they are doing the best they can. Other times it comes as motivation, helping someone take the next step forward. Encouragement also creates connection. When people feel supported, they are more likely to open their hearts and share their concerns. This trust allows chaplains to offer deeper guidance and spiritual care during challenging life experiences.

Encouragement is the language of hope shifting attention away from fear and towards life's possibilities. It reminds individuals that setbacks are not the end of the story. Through words of affirmation, prayer, and compassionate listening, a chaplain's voice of encouragement can help others rediscover the strength they already possess.

A Courageous Voice

The chaplain's presence requires a considerable amount of courage. This display of courage is foremost represented in knowing who we are and what our purpose in life is as servants of God.³ Often courage is often associated with dramatic actions, but in the chaplain's context it frequently appears in other forms. It takes courage to sit beside someone experiencing grief or trauma. It takes courage to listen to painful stories without turning away. It takes courage to speak words of hope when circumstances seem overwhelming.

Because chaplains confront their own vulnerabilities to offer genuine care, they must supervise their own triggers and traumatic experiences to allow them to remain present, open-minded, and empathetic. This openness can

³ Paul Tillich defines the courage to be as "the ethical act in which man affirms his own being in spite of those elements of his existence which conflict with his essential self-affirmation." See *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952 [2000]), 3.

be emotionally demanding, yet it creates deep connection with others. Moral leadership requires courage. When faced with situations that challenge moral values, chaplains use their courageous voice to advocate for compassion and fairness even when doing so conflicts with the status quo.

Courage also enables chaplains to accompany people through uncertainty. They don't always have answers, but they do offer companionship and reassurance. This courage transforms the chaplain's presence into a source of strength for others.⁴ This demonstration of selfless service confirms that spiritual leadership does not always mean standing in front, but it often means standing beside others during their most challenging moments.⁵

A Prophetic Voice

Another dimension of the chaplain's voice is its prophetic quality, speaking truth with courage and moral clarity. A prophetic voice challenges injustice, advocates for the dignity of others, and calls attention to the deeper values that guide individuals and leaders⁶. When you consider some of the most catastrophic military scandals (e.g., My Lai, Abu Ghraib, Tailhook, etc), it is unfortunate that a chaplain's voice was either silent or avoided. Often that "silence" is extremely loud to the onlookers and sometimes interpreted as agreement with the wrongs or injustices committed.

When Chaplains encounter situations where people feel powerless or unheard they use their prophetic voice to speak on behalf of those whose voices that are overlooked, ignored or marginalized. This prophetic role requires wisdom and discernment. It is not about confrontation for its own sake but about aligning words and actions with principles of empathy, fairness, and integrity.

A chaplain might remind individuals of their moral responsibilities during the fog of war and other events that challenge our moral foundations. When advising leaders a chaplain shares the impact that religious affairs and morale have upon the *esprit de corps*. Ultimately, the prophetic voice is rooted in conscience and arises from the core values that every person carries with them inherent worth and deserves to be treated with dignity and respect.

Because chaplains work within institutions and organizations, this role requires courage. Speaking truth within institutions and other systems can be uncomfortable and unpopular. Yet the chaplain's responsibility is not to seek approval but to remain faithful to the ethical and spiritual principles they hold dear. This is the charge of the prophetic voice that chaplains carry

⁴ "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9, *ESV*).

⁵ "And He is with you wherever you are." (Qur'an 57:4)

⁶ See Department of the Army, *Religious Support and Internal Advisement* (ATP 1-05.04) (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2017), 4-8.

with them when they advise command.⁷ When exercised with humility and wisdom, the prophetic voice becomes a source of guidance that helps leaders and servicemembers remain grounded in their deepest values.

A Leader's Voice

The chaplain leads by using their unique voice. Their styles differ from many traditional models of leadership. While most leaders focus primarily on authority, strategy, or performance, chaplains add to that presence, compassion, and moral guidance. Along with directing others, chaplains lead through service. Their influence emerges from building trust rather than relying upon their position alone. People listen to chaplains because they feel understood and respected.⁸

The chaplain's voice of leadership helps an organization see the whole person. Many leadership roles concentrate on productivity or profits, but chaplains consider the emotional, spiritual, and relational well-being of everyone as equally important. Chaplains also operate in diverse environments where individuals hold different beliefs and values. This requires a leadership approach centered on empathy and consideration rather than assuming uniformity alone will motivate individuals.

The chaplain's voice of leadership is often in the background. They may not receive recognition for the important things they do, yet their impact can be profound. Taking a stand for what's right, having a privileged conversation, leading a small group in prayer, or offering a thoughtful word of inspiration at the right time can change the direction of the organization or an individual's life. The chaplain's voice of leadership embodies a form of leadership that emphasizes a person's worth. It is during such critical moments that our voices speak loudly to the hearts and minds of those we lead.

A Professional Voice

Although chaplaincy is a deeply spiritual practice, it is also a professional vocation. Chaplains specialize in pastoral care, counseling, ethics, cultural awareness, and emotional intelligence. This preparation allows them to serve individuals and communities with skill as well as compassion.

Professional chaplains attain national certification and follow ethical guidelines that emphasize confidentiality, respect, and accountability. These principles ensure that the care they provide remains trustworthy and

⁷ "We will assist you with your brother and grant you both authority so they cannot harm you. With our signs certainly you and those who follow you will prevail" (Qur'an 28:35).

⁸ Edwin Friedman in his book *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (Seabury, 2007) emphasizes that good leadership has less to do with skill, data, technique, or knowledge, and more to do with a leader's ability to discern and navigate the emotional and relational climate of a family or organization.

responsible. Professionalism also means recognizing the limitation of their role as care providers and advisors and the boundaries associated with leading practitioners and offering confidentiality. Chaplains collaborate with medical professionals, counselors, educators, and other community leaders. When a situation requires specialized expertise, they help connect individuals with the appropriate support needed. I think military chaplains should strive for the highest levels of professionalism as chaplains.

In addition, chaplains continually develop their skills through education and reflection. They learn specific spiritual traditions, familiarize themselves with the field of psychology, other disciplines, and leadership to better understand the needs of those they serve. This combination of denominational dedication and professional discipline strengthens the chaplain's effectiveness and ensures that their care is not only heartfelt but also informed and reliable.⁹

Conclusion

The chaplain's voice carries a unique blend of compassion, courage, faith, and wisdom. It resonates during times of joy and fear, offering encouragement and guidance while remaining grounded in professionalism and spiritual depth. Through listening, presence, and moral clarity, a chaplain's voice helps individuals and communities navigate life's challenges and triumphs. The chaplain's voice helps servicemembers and their families connect with the human experience, of hope, dignity, and faith, and resilience.

A chaplain's voice resounds in settings filled with trials, change, and uncertainty. Our voice doesn't dominate conversations but represent the presence of God amid confusion, devastation, loneliness, fear, or loss. Sometimes the most meaningful message our voice communicates is simply, "You are not alone in your struggle."

Grounded in our traditions our voice is how we connect with others through prayer, reflection, devotion, and sacred wisdom. Our words are shaped not only by knowledge but also by our experiences that create a natural sensitivity to the spiritual needs of others. Because of this, our voice carries unique authority. When we speak with sincerity and care about the realities of life, we affirm that authority. Ultimately, our voice serves as a bridge between human struggle and the hope of salvation. The deeper questions of purpose, sacrifice, meaning, and redemption are illuminated in the realities of daily life intersect with all when chaplains raise their voices.

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⁹ The Association of Professional Chaplains provides the qualifications and competencies for professional chaplains to reflect qualities of knowledge and skills to excel in their profession. See <https://www.apchaplains.org/resources/the-impact-of-professional-spiritual-care/>.



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